

Mr. Bessell

17 July 1956

AQUATONE AND THE SOVIET NOTE

1. Decisions must be made within the next few days (a) on the future of AQUATONE and (b) on the answer to be made to the Soviet protest of 10 July (Soviet Note No. 23). The two matters are obviously related since a reply to the Soviet note must take account of future operations under AQUATONE unless they are to be indefinitely suspended and should be designed to place the United States in the most favorable position in the face of possible future Soviet moves.

2. The main risk to which the continuation of AQUATONE will expose the United States, which has to be weighed against the intelligence this project will yield, is the political cost that would result from the convincing attribution of the overflight activities to the U.S. Government in the eyes of the world. The immediate threat is that such convincing attribution will result from further political moves by the USSR, such as the ventilation of Soviet allegations in the Security Council. In order to assess this risk and to reduce it to a minimum, it is necessary (a) to inquire what the Soviet reaction to continued operations may be and (b) to devise measures which will discourage and counter a damaging Soviet political offensive.

3. The following comments are offered on the probable Soviet reaction to continued operations:

a. It is certain that the Soviets will continue their efforts at

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interception. Such evidence as can be drawn from the experience of operations from date supports the belief that, for a time at least, a U-2 aircraft is safe so long as there is no major malfunction of equipment. The ultimate contingency of the loss of an aircraft over enemy territory is discussed below.

b. Unless and until an aircraft is lost over unfriendly territory, there is absolutely no evidence the Soviets can produce either in published statement or in such a forum as the Security Council in support of their charges. They derive information of overflights through radar tracking and no record of radar tracks can be used to prove anything about either the identity or the location of an aircraft observed on a radar scope. It can only be alleged, not proved, that certain blips were seen at particular times and places and that these represented hostile rather than friendly aircraft.

c. There are other considerations which may make repeated diplomatic protests a less appealing maneuver than might at first appear. They would amount to an admission of inability to intercept the alleged invaders, since no one will believe that the Russians would not intercept intruder aircraft if they could. If the Soviet authorities allege that deep penetrations are being made and their principal cities are being overflown, they will be conceding that the U.S. has the power to deliver atomic bombs over much of their territory with impunity.

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Their desire to avoid such an admission of weakness to third countries and to their own people may cause them to charge the United States with only shallow penetrations of their territory. Even this will be embarrassing to us but it also will tend to limit the seriousness of the issue that is raised.

d. The considerations reviewed above certainly do not support any clear forecast of Soviet reaction, although they do suggest that, provided no loss of an aircraft occurs, any protest will be (a) embarrassing in certain respects to the Soviets themselves and (b) nothing more than a governmental assertion supportable by no hard evidence. Under these circumstances it may be suggested that the Soviet reaction to continued operations will depend very heavily on the U.S. reaction to their July 10th note, the manner in which the U.S. appears to be handling this whole issue before world opinion, and, of course, the degree of provocation.

4. In the situation here outlined, it is believed that this Government can and should pursue certain courses of action in order to reduce the risks that further political moves will be undertaken by the Soviet Government and that they will have a seriously damaging effect upon the U.S. position.

a. To begin with, the Soviets should not be encouraged to believe that their July 10th protest was completely and immediately

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effective. It so happens that operations under AQUATONE ceased within hours of the receipt of the Soviet note in Washington. If this suspension is permanent, one of its consequences will be to confirm to the Soviets that these activities were indeed sponsored by the U. S. Government and to indicate that they were under very tight governmental control. Soviet tracking of AQUATONE missions has been confused and it is by no means certain Soviet authorities have completely ruled out the possibility these activities are being conducted by the British or perhaps by some semi-autonomous group with U.S. backing but without close governmental control. It is well worthwhile to maintain this uncertainty. Moreover, if the Soviet diplomatic protest accomplishes the desired result within hours, there is every reason to repeat the maneuver. There is therefore a strong case, regardless of the basic policy decision concerning the future of AQUATONE, for at a minimum one more shallow penetration overflight of Soviet territory.

b. Both in the reply to the Soviet note and through other supporting actions, the United States should build up a conception of overflight activity as a technique of spying employed occasionally by both sides and comparable in every way to more conventional, old-fashioned techniques. From its inception AQUATONE has been organized as a covert, non-legal, intelligence collection project of the Clandestine Service. It is no more illegal, to no greater degree a hostile act, and

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involves no more violation of sovereignty than the digging of the tunnel under the border of West Berlin and many other clandestine activities. It is totally harmless to the persons and activities about whom the intelligence is gathered. If it is said that an overflying airplane could deliver an atomic bomb without warning, the same is true of any Communist vessel in a Western seaport. It is believed that this concept can be powerfully supported by including in the reply to the Soviet note not only a denial that any U.S. military aircraft crossed the Soviet border on the dates alleged in the protest but also a counter attack in the form of well supported allegations of Soviet clandestine activities so described as to emphasize their parallelism with those of which the U.S. has been accused. These activities might include both Soviet overflights of Northern Canada a year ago, more recent flights over West Germany, and more conventional spying activities which involve a violation of sovereignty.

c. In order to strengthen the U.S. position in the face of further Soviet allegations, it might well be desirable to fly a mission with a regular military aircraft up to the Baltic Coast of the USSR and then promptly advise the Soviet Government with an appropriate apology that this aircraft may inadvertently have crossed the Soviet border for a brief period. Such an apology, taken with a parallel one delivered some weeks ago, would render far more plausible the U.S. denial of deep penetration overflights in the face of the unsupported Soviet allegations.

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d. A number of other steps which would reduce the credibility of the Soviet allegations and thus discourage further diplomatic moves on their part may prove feasible. One of the most dramatic would be the interception of a Soviet military aircraft over West Germany. This may be possible since several illegal penetrations of up to 40 miles have recently been made. In the field of propaganda and argument, the Soviet accusations might be represented as an effort to discredit the President's proposal for legal air inspection.

5. Assuming that the Soviet allegations can be somewhat deflated by the steps suggested above, it may be desirable also to minimize further provocation of the Soviet Government to the extent consistent with continued collection of the highest priority intelligence. A proposal for accomplishing this result is as follows:

a. Taking account of what has already been accomplished, there are some six groups of targets of the utmost importance in European Russia located as follows:

- (1) The Moscow area, largely covered by clouds on the occasion of an earlier mission;
- (2) Three or four scattered targets in the Ukraine which could be covered in one mission with suitable weather;
- (3) A number of targets on or near the north coast of the Black Sea;

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(4) A series of critically important targets on the Volga from Gorkii down to Stalingrad including the Kapustin Yar missile test site;

(5) A group of targets including atomic energy installations and major industrial centers in the Central Urals;

(6) The area of the Kola Peninsula and the coast of the Barents Sea, which includes non-strategic bomber bases and may include other important installations.

b. Clearly the Moscow area is a target of the utmost political sensitivity and any further missions in that area might well be deferred. On the other hand, the coastal areas both north and south can be overflown with shallow penetrations and minimum risk of loss of an aircraft and might well be regarded therefore as having lower sensitivity. The other groups of targets here listed probably fall between these extremes.

c. It is proposed that the general policy should be to authorize (1) overflights of the coastal and near coastal areas, including the lower Volga and Southern Ukraine, and the European Satellites as opportunity offers, and (2) a limited and specified number of missions over other regions well away from Moscow and Leningrad. The specific authorizations might include two missions over the Northern Ukraine, two along the Volga, and two or three in the Urals.

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6. A final question about these proposals which must be considered with care is how to deal with the ultimate contingency of the loss of an aircraft over friendly territory. It is believed that the general principle should be to handle this contingency in the same way as the conclusive compromise of any other illegal clandestine activity. Some explanation of the presence of the aircraft over Soviet territory should be offered. This might be one of the ones provided for in our present emergency procedure such as faulty navigation or it might be possible to have the actual overflights appear to be the work of a refugee group with covert U.S. support. In any event, it should be made clear that the aircraft was not a military aircraft and that its pilot was not a member of the Armed Services. Although this would not constitute an open admission of deliberate U.S. violation of the Soviet border, it would leave the impression that the overflight probably was the deliberate work of the clandestine service, just as the handling of the Berlin tunnel disclosure has undoubtedly left a similar impression in many quarters. This explanation should be developed in such a way as to make clear that neither the responsible Chiefs of the Armed Services nor the senior civilian officials of the Government had specifically authorized the activity in question. Admittedly, this method of dealing with the contingency we most fear would result in newspaper editorials about the irresponsibility of the Central Intelligence Agency. It is submitted, however, that the result of this kind

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of embarrassment is inherent in any and every clandestine operation. There is always some risk that the operation will be compromised. When any such operation is compromised and made the subject of a public protest so convincing that denial is not very plausible then the only remaining choice is whether to allow the Chief of State to be suspected of authorizing the activity or deliberately to direct suspicion to the clandestine service. Surely the latter is the proper course.

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